

EXHIBIT A

FIRST DRAFT

Untitled

Title. Kidney Story
By Sonya Larson

Order of information? Boswell: just how much dramaticness to the act can you take out?
How much dramatic context can you take out?

We were two months from going for Transfer—like really giving up-- when they phoned about my Angel. A real one, too: no car accident, no sudden onset anything. She wasn't dead, and she wasn't even doing a chain thing, aimed ultimately to save her husband or her sister or her very best friend, none of which, it turned out, she had.

It was just that she had two and she only needed one. And on top of that, grinned the surgeon through the phone: we matched.

By Wednesday I was back in that bed. Bao squeezed down by where my fingers were. He lifted the cross from his neck and kissed it. Bao said, "It's really happening." In fear and amazement my eyelashes flapped over all the objects of the room, my husband gazing down at me like a stammering face in a flipbook, miming love.

"It's happening?" I said. Hard sheets fluttered by my feet, I could hardly speak; hot rags were stuffed down my throat, with all the Where? of teenaged deep woods of your very first time. I counted backwards from ten, drifting into a valley of waterfalls, and I couldn't tell if my last draining thoughts were about me or about her, my Angel, whoever the princess might be.

A finger snapped. It was over. I woke to the sight of Bao over there in the hospital chair, rocking back and forth. He was crying into his large, dumbed hands, overwhelmed like I've never seen him.

I called out. "Am I alive?"

"Baby!" he said, leaping and rushing over, his eager arms wedging themselves under me, and soon we were laughing and the laughter felt strange traveling up through my lungs, through the roof of my mouth, like a language I was remembering only now. Even the ceiling looked different: large tiles sprayed freely with black dots of so many shapes and sizes. I could see in them intricate patterns, like constellations in stars.

Bao watched the ceiling too. But he was in a different world. "How can we ever thank her?" he said, like a person raging at his God. "How? How? How?"

It wasn't a question with an answer. "I," was all I could say. I said it over and over. I, I, I.

I recovered. I got used to walking without the tank and tangle of tubing, strength slowly returning to my arms, my legs, my back. Bao pulled out the handrails, whirring loose the screws with the same drill we'd put them in with. Little dark holes remained in the walls, damp with stray fibers, and when I pressed my fingertips over them I remembered the smooth, long cold where the metal had been. The ___ that Sandra gave me when she didn't need them anymore. Even my hands hardened with new muscle, more flexible. I was a superhero realizing her powers. I had a new mark: pink and curved around my pelvis, and for once there was a scar I was grateful for.

Sonya Larson

Exhibit 1

07/30/2021

It felt good to get away from the hospital, all its shiny boxes and hallways, relentlessly clean.

From the basement Bao brought up grandmäh's dining chair. I sat on the bony cushion, grooves of the twin dragon tails curving down the armrests, trying to remember how I felt when I thought I would get old. In the corner were ____ from when we thought we would have to go to Transfer—that went away too. To the curb went the wheelchair, the walker, both canes. It only took four weeks, maybe five. Pretty soon I'd be able to sleep in our bed again, just as soon as I felt like I could handle the softness of the mattress, but also I was scared to lie down with him again, like maybe he would be expecting things I wasn't ready for. → mention renal failure symptoms/recovery.

Right about then is when the letter shows up. → shift in tone needs to build very gradually.

It came in the real mailbox, envelope and paper, the whole works, a round gold sticker over the already-glued flaps. Turns out it was wrapped in another letter-- from the surgeon himself. I looked at this letter. My surgeon's handwriting was boxy and professional, rushed occasionally with the loops and dashes of fervor. So amazed was he by the generosity, the kindness, the selflessness, that he just had to chaperone along this missive himself. The spray of everything was across my grandmother's table. I thought that doctors weren't supposed to be able to handwrite anything at all, not even their own names.

"What's that?" said Bao.

"I don't know," I said, and I didn't, but even so my heart was pounding.

She had used two sheets of paper shaped like a zebra's head. Blue gel pen. But she was thirty-six, according to what she said.

Dear Recipient, → Make letter shorter.

My name is Dawn Rothario. I'm a thirty-six-year-old white female, and I live in Greater Boston.

In 2014 I read my first article about living kidney donation, and in the years since, I have been reminded constantly of the harrowing experience of dialysis and the dire need in our country for kidneys. Armed of the possibility of donating one of my own, I know that I stood to make a maximum impact in others' lives with only minimal risk to myself.

...It went on...

...There were some things about the MGA Transplant Team, the logistics of paired exchange...

Personally, my childhood was marked by trauma and abuse; I didn't have the opportunity to form secure attachments with my family of origin. A positive outcome of my early life is empathy, that it opened a well of possibility between me and strangers. While perhaps many more people would be motivated to donate an organ to a friend or family member in need, to me, the suffering of strangers is just as real.

A few more things about me: I enjoy sailing, cats, ____, and ____. I've been able to do some gentle stretching and yoga. In fact I'm rather astonished to tell you that several of my

Bikram yoga instructors will attempt to practice all SEVEN scheduled classes on the day of my surgery, in solidarity.

I can't tell you how happy I am that my gift--two organs and four surgeries later--resulted in your receiving my kidney. I'm so grateful to the MGH Transplant Team, who share in my amazement of our paired exchange, which seems nothing less than miraculous. Throughout my preparation for becoming a donor, which spanned precisely eight months from my first testing to the date of our surgeries, I was most excited about the recipient who would come off of the deceased donor list and end our chain. I focused my mental energy on imagining and celebrating you.

My gift, which begat yours, trails no strings. You are deserving of an extended and healthy life simply for being here.

I would love to know more about you. Perhaps even meet you one day. But I accept any level of involvement or response from you, even if it is none.

Kindly,
Dawn M. Rothario

There was a photograph. It was small, appeared cut out from one that was bigger. I blinked several times; I couldn't believe that I was really looking at this person. The person who had saved my life. She was tall, slender, white, a long ponytail resting across one shoulder. The photo was shorn real close near her shoulder, as if to remove a person who'd been
standing there. She appeared to be at some sort of county fair, smiling against the backdrop
of a Tilt-A-Whirl, the blurry feet of children scampering off the edges, and in her long
fingers a rainbow-swirled lollipop the size of a fist.

Her name was Dawn. Of course it was.

I didn't tell Bao about it, but I left everything on the table, like I was wanting him to discover it himself. Eventually he said, "Wow. Wow."

"What do you make of it?" he said.

"I don't know," I said, and I didn't. → Contemplate longer and harder what the backstory of all this is. Keep all narration in front story, however.

"We need to show our thanks. It's the least we can do."

"You bet," I said.

There was some debate over who should make the phone call. "Could you do it?" I said. "I feel weird. Could you say that I'm still recovering?"

Bao looked at me weird. "Sure," he said. "Okay." → Maybe he feels, since this gift is life is newly given to him, that he can't/shouldn't challenge her? --Even the way Bao looked at me was more precious, more delicate. I was something not to be touched, not to be challenged. [or perhaps she felt this way when she was dying? Their own way of taking each other for granted is coming back into things. How they have regained permission to be cruel to one another.]

Bao was questioning me now. When I was dying, Bao stopped questioning me and so did everyone else, and for once I felt accepted and free.

I listened to Bao make the phone call. It was a few days later, on a Saturday morning, and I was still on the couch, clutching my blanket and staring at Sandra's ____ [another type of gift], the ____.

His voice seemed to occupy a whole different register, high-pitched and ever-leaping to the next sentence, like he couldn't wait to show even more of his enthusiasm.

"We would love, love, love to have you over for lunch," he said. I concentrated on the ____ (part of Sandra's gift). Bao never loved, loved, loved anything in his life. "It would be an honor for us too," he said.

Arrangements were made. She would come on Thursday. Suddenly the house looked vulgar with disarray, outdated styles, objects that made no sense and revealed our insular vulgarities. I panicked. It was too late to change the cabinets. Too late to repaint the trim. What would we serve? We hadn't served anyone—hadn't even had anyone to our house—in two years, maybe three? She would come at eleven a.m.

I went to the store. I looked through the ___, the ___. She said she liked ___ so. [gifts back and forth.] I put in a can of white paint. I thought about a card. I went to the Thank You section, fanned through the options. "____." Nope. Yeah. Maybe something I thought was funny because obviously nothing I got would in any way be equal...

I went to Jewelry and Accessories. I loaded up. Like I was tearing it off the little turning Y-shaped displays. Beaded necklaces and gold bangles and crystal rings and something called a toe clutch. Watches—did people anymore where watches? But yeah. I had a field day. The works. It was fun filling my cart like they did in the movies when the world is coming to an end or a shooter's on the loose or the neighborhood's on fire, it was grabbing all the stuff for a person like I'd never do for myself.

I had to lean forward with my arms straight just to push the cart to Checkout.

At Checkout the glittering pile moved slowly down the conveyor belt. I put down the plastic divider so the Checkout girl would know what was what. The woman behind me blinked. She beeped her gun at every piece in my stash, one tag at a time, like this stuff happened every day. She said that'll be \$193.80. Whoa now. Hold up.

The girl looked at me for the first time with pale, still eyes. She wanted to know did I want to put something back. Um, yeah, you think? The girl rested her gun on the conveyor belt and seemed to look at something interesting on the ceiling while the woman behind me huffed about in exasperation. → Look to Carver, Saunders.

I went back to the ___ and got the ___. I was sort of, I don't know, panicked.

"What are you doing?" said Bao. I was kneeling on newspaper in the entry way, brush in hand. The chemicals filled my nostrils and felt so new.

"Painting the trim," I said. "They're a wreck."

"God, why?" he said.

"I don't know, I don't know, I don't know."

I called Sandra. I often did this, I called Sandra in a panic—I needed her, I would sob; in pursuit of her in the middle of the night. But since the surgery I'd avoided her. Sandra was in Transfer.

Her father picked up. "It's you!" he said. Sandra didn't have a husband, or even a boyfriend. She'd moved into her childhood bedroom, back to where she came from. That was all our greatest wish and greatest fear.

"Let me get her. She's asleep," said Sandra's dad.

"No, no," I said. "Please. Not for me."

But he only laughed. "What do you mean, not for you? Are you crazy?"

There was the crackle of being put on a countertop, gentle shuffling of slippers on muted wood. Then a long, anxious silence during which I wanted to die. My fingers tingled, wanting escape.

The phone shuffled again. "Hey...Chuntao?" Her voice was the same as always—surprised and knowing. And suddenly I was back there again, in our side-by-side beds, asking the nurse to pull back the privacy curtain so I could see her.

"Hi."

"You," she said, grinning. But then a cautious pause. "Where'd you go?"

What I used to like about calling Sandra is that when I was wailing, sobbing, raging at God, she didn't say calming things, soothing things. She was just quiet. But I could hear her listening. I liked that she didn't react. It made me feel normal and even unremarkable, what I've wanted all my life.

"Nowhere," I said. "I'm still here."

There was a long silence. Then my friend said, "Why haven't you told me your news?"

"So you know," I said, relieved I didn't have to break anything to her.

"Of course, you bitch." She was joking and hurt.

Another long pause. I was aware that I was supposed to be filling the silence but I could say nothing, my throat was strangled viciously some wonderful, kind person.

"I'm so glad for you," she said, in the saddest voice I have ever heard.

How much longer have you got?

Six weeks, she said. Maybe seven. She started to crumple.

You never know, I said. I mean, look at me. I never would have thought. Right?

Right, she said.

Afterwards I went out into the patio. I needed air. The flowers Dawn Rothario had sent me were on the hot iron table, the lilies over-opened, reeking the whole yard with their smell. I jostled the table and fine yellow powder shook off their pistils and onto the table, down through the cut-out stenciled shapes.

The living. Suddenly this was who I was now—what I'd been all my life but then suddenly I wasn't. You see, I'd gotten used to that. You see I'd begun to resent them.

I wiped down the table, the counters. I gathered all the crap on the staircase and found other places to put it. Afterwards the carpet was clean and free of stress. I thought, I should make it look like this all the time. I wrapped the ___ in my best wrapping paper, really good thick stuff, though technically it was recycled from Christmastime—red with little white bells all over it. Hopefully she wouldn't think it was weird. I brought in her flowers and refreshed the water and put them on the dining room table, so she could see.

Bao had made some little crackers topped with cream cheese and cucumbers. "Funny," I said. Bao didn't cook, and still had managed not to.

The doorbell rang. I was frozen with fear. It was 10:56. We were ready, sure, but we also weren't, and I felt alarm and injustice. Bao put down the tray of crackers and rushed to the door.

I heard her voice before I saw her. So much exclaiming, hugging, so loud.

And the two of them came walking toward me [write this logistical language so that it's implied, or make it meaningful], Bao grinning behind me, searching my face.

She was even more beautiful than the photo. Slightly older-looking—creased and smiling eyes, looser skin—but emanating a glow that no camera could capture without filters. Out came her long arm, elegant hand, her delicately curved fingernails, tips creamy white.

"Chuntao?" said Bao. I looked at him. His eyebrows were anxious and a little dismayed, urging me on.

"Hi!" I said. "Hi hi hi. It's so good to meet you." I guess I was staring. We shook. Her hands were cold—must have been the weather. Mine were sweaty, and I wiped them on my pants, though then I thought maybe that would look rude, like I didn't want her germs or something.

"Sorry," I said. "I just wiped my hand on my pants, but that's not because I don't want your germs or something."

Dawn Ruthario smiled with concern. "No worries," she said. Then her smile seemed to contemplate something, shake it off, blink, and return to its presumed direction. "I can't believe this is happening," she said. She put her hand over her heart. On her chest was some sort-of sparkly brooch—a burst of flowers, emerging from an articulation of gold-rimmed amethysts—and her hand must have felt its hard rough jagged surface.

Bao was talking to Dawn Ruthario, laughing and nodding. The crescendos of the neighbor's lawn mower, the wind chimes on the porch, the traffic outside the window [any inside sounds?]: the voice of Dawn Ruthario rose above them all. It was a beautifully melody, exuberant and controlled/practiced. [actually, this scene could largely be focused on the awkwardness of logistics.] Dawn Ruthario walked through our living room, examining photos, objects, a strange breeze of _____ following her. I felt like a zoo animal watching human onlookers make their way toward more interesting exhibits. Suddenly my arms were too long, there was something on my face, my hair was in the way. I crossed my arms, and at least then they felt like they had somewhere to go.

Bao suggested that we sit around the coffee table. "We made some snacks," he said. "Nothing special."

"Oh my goodness," said Dawn Ruthario, looking down at the spread near our knees, taking in our plate of Ritz crackers fanned out around the rim. Everything looked the same color, pale yellow and brown. Suddenly I wanted to slap Bao. Why hadn't we added a bright green garnish, a spray of red peppers, something, anything?

She folded her skirt behind her and sat. She touched her front as she did so, and I thought about the hole inside of her. I wondered if it still hurt. But I didn't ask. I didn't really want to know. →But her gestures/voice betray her: she is disappointed. Did she want, maybe, for the recipient to be poorer, to be in more dire straits? She is disappointed to learn that maybe the recipient brought it on herself.

Nobody was eating. I spread some cheese on a cracker and put it in my mouth, which tasted like nothing, just water, just the texture of cold creaminess and dry crumbles.

"So you live in ____?" said Bao.

I went for my seltzer. Oh Poor, Burning, Substitute for Life.

She had a tight little smile.

"You're drinking wine," she said.

I stopped in my sip. "Actually, no!" I said. "It's ____."

"Oh!" she said. "Ha ha ha." → But her gestures/voice betray her: she is dismayed.

We were quiet. --And I tried remember all things I've had to learn, the things they've taught me. Don't react, don't react, don't react. An old pattern that's outgrown its use. -- Receiver is in recovery. The suggestion that she destroyed her own kidney.

I should never have been drinking. And I knew this. I get the flush.

I am capable of learning nothing.

I thought about ___, already in transfer. I felt so glad I wasn't her, that I was reaching across a plane and into somebody else's life.

→ Put this earlier? I gave her the _____. She practically squealed in delight, there were little tears in her eyes. I was relieved. The remains of the red paper with white bells were cracked open all over the coffee table. She quickly hid the ___ away in her purse, out of sight, saying she'd fully relish in it later, and I was relieved for that too.

"I have an appointment at two," she said. I looked at the clock. It was 11:07.

Bao is trying to get Chuntao to say thank you.

"And we just couldn't believe what you did." He asked her questions about her life, her dog. He laughed at her jokes. "You two must have a lot to say to each other," he said, standing up. "I'll duck out." And I looked-at-him-desperately, not wanting him to leave us here.

He left. → Dawn looks nervous too.

"So," I said. "How's your recovery? [play on the word 'recovery.' Re. Cover.]

"It's good," she said. "Yoga is helping. I still can't ___ though."

"Neither can I," I said. "I can't ____."

"Are you finding that ____?"

"Yeah."

"Me too."

"What a bitch."

Narrator contemplating the hole inside of her. She must have had a scar like mine.

She was looking at me. She was thinking of her organ, buried and covered up inside of me, keeping me alive instead of her.

"You know, of all the things I expected, I didn't expect that I would feel like *this*. That I would I'm not missing it at all. Not one bit." → She is talking to herself.

"Do take care of it," she said.

"You think that I wouldn't?"

"No, that's not what I mean." She recovered. "It's yours, of course. It's yours now."

"Well, sort of," I said. "I mean, you gave it to me. It's still sort of yours." She looked at me, hopefully and suspiciously. "Don't worry," I said. "I've changed so much. So much is different now. Your gift—I'm so grateful. I'm going to treat it so good. I'm going to take good care." And she put her hand over the place where her organ had been.

"Well, I'd better go," she said. Now that she thought it, there was going to be a lot of traffic.

It was 12:27, and I thought Yes, like I had won a whole free half and hour of new life.

"Thank you so much for my gift," she said. The lips of tears quivered in Dawn Ruthario's eyes. But I couldn't tell where they were coming from, just what they were all about.

"You bet," I said, and hurried along her standing up, the putting on the purse straps, with my eyes. I called Bao out from his hiding place so that he could say good-bye. I wanted her out of there.

And the greatest relief I'll ever feel was when she left and I sunk into the couch and I was sweating with new calm and staring at the ceiling fan, whirring so freely, its beaded chain hanging down and swaying in its own small, affected/inevitable circle.

"Well!" I breathed loudly. "That was hard."

Bao picked up the plates and crumpled napkins, saying nothing.

"What?" I said. "What is it? What?"

"I don't know what to say." He was moving toward the kitchen, concentrating on what was in his arms, not looking at me.

"What do you mean?"

"You didn't thank her. Not once."

"Yes I did," I said. I did. Didn't I? "Wait. Didn't I?"

"No," he said.

How grateful am I supposed to be? I was full of rage.

"I don't know," I said. "I feel a little funny about her. Don't you? Don't you feel a little funny about her?"

He threw his hands in the air. "Are you crazy?" he said. "It doesn't matter what you think. It doesn't matter what you think of her. It never will. She gave you life, did you forget about that? Jesus Christ, I feel thankful. Don't you fucking feel that?"

He stormed out. I went and sat at the iron table in the yard, dusted with the pollen of her flowers.

What I learned was that I am not Special. I am special to the people who love me: Bao, _____. But I am not Special. And that was a remarkable feeling.

There's a thing my dad used to say, that there are two kinds of people in this world. People who spend their lives trying desperately not to change, and do. And people who spend their lives trying desperately to change. And don't.

Which one am I? How much do these steps matter?

Will this change me?

Now I'm supposed to rejoin the living. I'm supposed to be thankful? But maybe really I belonged with people like Sandra.

That night I went into my old bed. I put my arms around my husband in the dark, felt the old familiar hairs of his chest, felt very still with fear.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"Me too," I said.

Attempts to go to bed with husband? He hugs her fiercely.

With Sandra→ And I was thinking about the fires I'd been through and who had gone with me. He will never know. No matter how you might surface, you can't recover from an intimacy like that.

How much longer now?

Two weeks.

But last week it was seven. "Are you sure? Is that what they said?"

She let out something like a scream and a cry. "Why are you asking me this?"

Okay, I said. Okay okay okay. → look to Seattle General for this final scene.

Chuntao, she said, her voice crumpling.

I. I. I'm here for you, I said.

She seemed to be composing herself. Then she said, I think maybe I won't be well enough to talk. → see poem. Also, see Anne Carson.

You won't? It sent through me a spear of pain. For my own orphaned heart.

It will be too embarrassing for me, she said, and I wished to replay it to listen again for the edges and splits of her tone. I couldn't tell her aim. I wanted to ask. But the thing about the dying is that they command respect, the deepest through-river resonate with primordial sounds, the kind of respect that people steal from one another.

Okay, I said.

Okay, she said, hesitating. She composed herself again, swallowing. Thank you for understanding.

There was a long pause.

Hey, she said. You met her, right?

I did.

How was it?

I sat for a long time, thinking. I wanted to tell the truth. It was fine, I said.

Is she a total saint? Is she the kindest fucking person on the planet?

I swallowed. It was more complicated than that. It was a big old Yes and No. There were stories to tell. So much.

Pretty much, I said.

Figured, she said.

There wasn't much to say after that. A line had been drawn. → This is the emotional climax. Meeting her savior and reporting back to the dead. But who would ever do such a thing? It was like reporting news of Jesus to those already in Hell. It's like, if I was walking on earth and I'd seen Jesus I would keep it to myself. I would only tell certain other people. I would never tell people in Hell. And if I had been in Hell already, I wish I'd never know, I'd wish I had never seen it.

How to do this? All my life there has only been that question. Not knowing the answer, we sat, miming what would be affections into the phone.

All right, then.

Yes.

You first.

No, you.

No. You.

And I was jealous that at least she knew what she wanted.

What I'd wanted had been so clear. But now, this terrible now: what do I know?

One thing, maybe.

I had a friend and a person who in the darkness knew my name.
I miss her.
